



## TRANSLATION OF LITERATURE AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION: A RE-APPRAISAL

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### ABSTRACT

North-east India, being the homeland of a large number of ethnic communities, varieties of languages and literature necessitates translation in order to be expressed and appreciated well by their neighbours and outsiders. Not only in the field of literature but in the field of art and culture, music and dance etc, has translation played a vital role in bridging the gap among different groups. Therefore, prospects of Comparative Literature are in high esteem in the perspectives of literature from north-east India. While accepting and appreciating the concept of translation and prospect of Comparative literature in the context of north-east India, this paper is an attempt to look into two issues related to these concepts – i) Translation of literature from north-east India into English and/or other Indian/north-east Indian languages and ii) Re-examine/problematize the concept of 'national integration'. My argument is to propose an alternative to translation of north-east Indian literature into English. The concept of 'national integration' is a complex issue which needs to be addressed differently. I would suggest that instead of the American idea of 'melting pot' and national integration at the cost of curtailing the differences, we should try to develop a sense of respect for differences.

**KEY WORDS:** Translation, National Integration, Melting Pot, Respect for Differences.

### INTRODUCTION:

People have the general tendency of sharing one's thoughts and feelings, needs and experiences to others. Throughout history, language has proved to be the best tool through which human beings could express these feelings and experiences to others. But the problem arises at the point that all the people do not share the same language. At this point the indispensable role of translation as a means of transferring the meaning of one language into another is felt.

North-east India, being the homeland of a large number of ethnic communities, varieties of languages and literature necessitates translation in order to be expressed and appreciated well by their neighbours and outsiders. Not only in the field of literature but in the field of art and culture, music and dance etc, translation has played a vital role in bridging the gap among different groups. Therefore, prospects of Comparative Literature are in high esteem in the perspectives of literature from north-east India. Amiya Dev emphasized the need for translating regional language texts into English or other Indian languages in order to initiate comparative literature. His remarks regarding translation and comparative literature in the Indian context, I believe, would be quite appropriate in the context of north east India, "We live in a world where translation not only builds bridges but also subverts the power of dominant languages. ...my cue...is not justifying translation, but stress bilingual or rather bicultural reading that may initiate comparison" (Dev, 2011:11).

Amiya Dev emphasizes the role of translation in building a tradition of Comparative Indian Literature. It is evident from his words that translation serves the purpose of diminishing gaps and building bridges of unity amongst various groups of people of different language and culture. Moreover, the hegemony of dominant language and literature can also be dismissed by initiating comparison between 'dominant' and 'less powerful' language and literature.

In his article 'Comparative Literature: Indian Dimension', Swapan Majumdar says, "In Europe, adherence to a comparative approach was but a matter of choice, in India, it was a must, a necessity because of the multilingual state of confederacy" (2011: 32). This observation is equally applicable to the north-east India where there are varieties of languages and multiethnic communities.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS:

While accepting and appreciating the concept of translation and prospect of Comparative literature in the context of north-east India, this paper is an attempt to look into two issues related to these concepts:

- Translation of literature from north-east India into English and/or other Indian/north-east Indian languages and
- Re-examine/problematize the concept of 'national integration'.

My argument is to propose an alternative to translation of north-eastern literature into English. By translating north-eastern literatures into English, we are enriching the target language only and on the other hand, it has not helped an Assamese to understand and appreciate Arunachalee or Mizo and vice versa. Therefore it would be a great idea if we can think of translating one north-east Indian language into another north-eastern or Indian languages which would help one to understand literatures from Assamese, Arunachalee, Naga, Mizo, Garo or Khasi

society. I accept the relation between language and culture while talking about the translation of one regional language into other regional languages of India. I would like to substantiate my opinion in this regard by the views of Malinowski and Sapir. Malinowski (1938: 305) extremely claims that "language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture... it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterances" (As quoted in Katan 1999: 72). In view of this I propose that it would be more appropriate to translate a north-east Indian literary text into another Indian language instead of translating it into English.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The culture of an ethnic community from north-east India has every possibility of similarity in cultural ethos, social beliefs and practices with that of a south Indian ethnic community than with a community from Latin America. I would like to cite an example from my personal experience. *Kocharethi* is the first Malayalam novel to be written by Narayan, a tribal author about his community and its experiences-the Malayarayar who inhabit the Western Ghats where they border the districts of Central Kerala. It is interesting to note that there are ample evidences of rituals, beliefs and customs of the Malayarayar community in this novel which have striking similarities with many of the ethnic communities of North-East India. The Assamese community has also some similarities with the Malayarayar community in terms of life-cycle ritual, birth ceremonies, marriage customs or funeral rituals. Social taboos related to the days of menstruation were highly conspicuous among the Malayarayar. The menstruating girl has to spend seven days from the beginning of the cycle in a separate room and is prohibited from venturing out, entering the kitchen, or touching anyone. The same taboo is prevalent in the rural areas of Assam with a slight change (not in kind but only in degree) of the customs. What is significant here is the similarities between these two geographically separate communities. And it is these similarities which allow one to understand and appreciate the culture of the other. For someone outside India who is ignorant of such rituals and customs, it might appear something queer and strange. Therefore, it is always worthy of translating one Indian literary text into another Indian language which, on the other hand would help in the process of unity and building bridge amongst different groups of people of the country. Sapir (1929, p. 214), like Malinowski, was convinced that language could only be interpreted within a culture. Sapir introduces his essay on 'Language Race and Culture' (1949, p. 207) with these words: "Language has a setting ... language does not exist apart from culture" (As quoted in Katan, 1999, p. 73).

Li and Lu have the same opinions regarding culture and language:

"Language and culture are interdependently and inseparably related. They constitute an integral whole. Though they are by no means the same, neither of them could survive without the other (Li and Lu, 2010).

Thus, it is impossible to separate culture and language. Language is not just some impersonal codes and grammatical rules. Whenever we select words, form sentences, and send a message, we actually make cultural choice. We know that words in themselves do not carry the meaning. The meaning comes out of the context, the cultural usage.

While talking about translation J. House remarks that: "Translation is not only a linguistic act, it is also a cultural one, an act of communication across cultures. Translation always involves both language and culture simply because the two

cannot really be separated. Language is culturally embedded: it both expresses and shapes cultural reality, and the meanings of linguistic items, be they words or larger segments of text, can only be understood when considered together with the cultural context in which these linguistic items are used" (House, 2009: 11).

This statement from J. House is quoted here to substantiate my proposition that instead of translating a literary text from north-eastern literature into English, it is always far more better/fruitful to translate it into some other Indian languages where both the culture of the source and target language text possess some resemblance. Moreover, the question of unity among the differences within the country is more viable and necessary before we talk about universal brotherhood or unity. No doubt, English gives a place to meet, to gather all community together. But it helps only globalization. It never helps us to know and understand our neighbours. I would like to cite an example of the English translation of an Assamese novel *Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday* by an Arunachalee writer, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi (2001). The novel is set in the North East Frontier Agency (today's Arunachal) of the 1950s. The translated book *Silent Lips Murmuring Hearts* though included in the American and other Western university libraries which definitely is a good sign to boast about. But I wonder how this translation helps us (the North East Indian people) to know our neighbours or to build a bridge among different communities of this region! Therefore, I feel the need of translating to and from Indian or even North East Indian languages. What Dr Bhupen Hazarika and Zubeen Garg do in their music by singing in different languages of this region that unfortunately is lacking in the field of literature from North East India.

#### Issue of National Integration:

My views on the question of 'national integration' are a bit different. I would suggest that instead of the American idea of 'melting pot' and national integration at the cost of curtailing the differences, we should try to develop a sense of respect for differences. While mentioning the American concept of 'melting pot', it is prudent on my part to clarify the idea. 'Melting pot' is actually a metaphor that connotes the blending of many cultures, languages and religions to form a single national identity. The term was coined by Israel Zangwill in 1909 to refer to a concept where cultural attributes of many nations are merged into a distinctly "American" culture. Let me quote from *Encyclopedia of Social Problems: Melting Pot*

The earliest articulation of the melting pot concept came in 1782, from J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur, a French officer turned New York settler, who envisioned assimilated Europeans as ingredients in a vast melting pot of cultures. The concept of the melting pot later expanded to include people from different races and backgrounds, as it became one of the cornerstones of assimilation theory. While many academics dispute the relevance of the term, the model of the melting pot offers an idealistic vision of U.S. society and identity, combining people from diverse ethnic, religious, political, and economic backgrounds together into a single people (Vincent N, 2008: 575).

What I would like to propose is an alternative to this idea of 'melting pot' of losing one's identity whether racial, religious or linguistic. There should be resistance to melting. Another metaphor that is gaining popularity to call modern America these days is a 'salad bowl,' in which separate racial and ethnic groups interact without fully assimilating (Vincent N, 2008: 576-577).

When the presence of groups of people different culturally or otherwise is a reality in a society, then the recognition of this diversity and equal respect to all the diverse cultural groups is always necessary to promote integration. While talking against integration, I am not referring to the idea of integration that recognizes and respects cultural diversity. I am against that concept of 'national integration' where there is no scope for accommodation of cultural diversity. Instead, it prefers to a situation where all 'sub-cultural' or 'minor' groups embrace the culture of the dominant group and assimilate with it. Therefore, I support a situation where we always have respect for differences. Instead of the dream of a uniform, homogeneous society, such respect for differences is essential, in fact indispensable in the multicultural, multiethnic community of North-east India and for the heterogeneous nature of this society. Only then the concept of national integration would be effective in this region. The concept of 'multiculturalism' and 'cultural pluralism' bears such notion of respect for 'other', be it dominant or dominating.

Cultural pluralism or multiculturalism is an ideal concept to counter the melting concept of culture, tradition, customs, rituals and languages. It has gained popularity in a number of countries over the world. I would like to quote Francis Muchenje:

Multiculturalism recognizes cultural diversity present in society. This approach acknowledges cultural diversity and each culture is considered to have its own merits. The different cultures exists side by side understanding each other ways sympathetically (Muchenje, 2012: 75).

While talking about multicultural education and its role in nation building, Muchenje advocates for an approach that accommodates cultural diversity in the curriculum as well as in the classroom. In the light of Muchenje's views, I would like to propose inclusion of matters and literatures related to and about all ethnic groups of north east India in the curriculum of the schools, colleges and universi-

ties of north east India. This, I believe, would necessitate/accelerate the true sense of integration. A student of Assam will get the chance of knowing the culture and tradition of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram in the courses taught in the class and vice versa. Moreover, if literatures from Arunachal Pradesh (Mamang Dai, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, Lummer Dai), from Nagaland (Themusla Ao, Easterine Iralu), from Megalaya (Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, Tidolis Snaitang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Esther Syiem), from Manipur (Nahakpan Aruna Devi, Ratan Thyam), from Mizoram (H. Ramdinthari and Mona Zote), from Assam (Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharjya, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Homen Borgohain) turn out to be available in the curricula of educational system of each north east Indian state, students will be aware of one's neighbours and their rich cultural and literary heritage. This would not only empower him/her with knowledge of literatures from the whole region, but definitely will develop a sense of unity and affection towards each other amongst them. Inclusion of Rong Bong Terang and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's fiction in the literature course of Assamese departments in the academic institutes of Assam will certainly enhance a democratic genre. According to Muchenje, situations where cultural differences are perceived in an egalitarian mode rather than a superior inferior mode enhance intercultural understanding, tolerance and appreciation of cultural differences. He believes that the content of school curriculum should reflect the diverse cultural ethos of the society in a positive manner if it is to make an impact in nation building (Muchenje, 2012: 73).

Multiculturalism is the recognition of society's cultural diversity combined with efforts to promote the equality of all cultural traditions (Macionis, 1994). In this situation all cultures are taken to be equal and valid; no culture should be taken to be more superior to the other. Multiculturalism is a right to a difference (Ghosh, 1996/98). The concept of cultural pluralism is also synonymous with multiculturalism. Cultural pluralism refers to the presence of various cultures in a society or in a country and these cultures coexist in a supportive and favourable environment. Andersen and Taylor (2003:245) state that 'cultural pluralism refers to a situation where different groups in society maintain their distinctive cultures while co-existing peacefully with the dominant group'.

#### CONCLUSION:

In Assam, right from the days of Madhav Kandali's *Ramayan* through the ages of Sankaradeva (in his *Kirtana* and *Dashama* etc) till the modern time, translation from other Indian languages into Assamese has been proved to be a common and natural phenomenon. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the architect of modern Assamese literature, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, the father of modern Assamese drama, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, renowned Assamese artist and revolutionary poet and Dr Bhupen Hazarika being one of the best Indian lyricist, musician, singer, poet and filmmaker – all of them tried their best to bring the greatest from other cultural and literary world to Assam and Assamese cultural and literary world as well as to unfold the rich cultural heritage of Assam and the Assamese to the outer world and therefore, tried to translate to and from Assamese. We must admit the role of these cultural icons as cultural bridge builder.

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